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# Text to Screen Adaptation: Examining Reverse Ekphrasis in Joe Wright's Films Adapting for

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### Text to Screen Adaptation: Examining Reverse Ekphrasis in Joe Wright's Films

Adapting for the screen is an arduous task – one that never seems to fulfill readers' expectations. Screenwriter Charlie Kaufman expertly illustrated this phenomenon with his award-winning script, *Adaptation* (2002). In the film, Nicholas Cage plays both Charlie, a scatterbrained but devoted screenwriter, and Donald, Charlie's laid-back twin. Charged with adapting Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*, Charlie lets his fear of failing to meet his audience's expectations turn his work into a nightmarish, insurmountable task.

When Charlie's boss suggests that he make the book's two main characters fall in love in the film version, he challenges the deviation from the plot of the novel: "...the book isn't like that, and life isn't like that. You know, it just isn't. And...I feel very strongly about this" (*Adaptation*). Like many adapted screenplay writers, Charlie remains in a constant battle with himself – stay true to the novel, or please his boss by embellishing to boost box office ratings.

Charlie's dilemma begs the question: What makes a good film adaptation? The answer, of course, is relative. The results of such a survey would be skewed by the opinions of readers and viewers. But, perhaps, there is another way of examining adaptation by isolating specific components of the text in question.

My goal is to discover the role of imagery in creating a successful film adaptation. I will accomplish this by comparing imagery from three prominent novels – Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), and Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1877) – with imagery from their film adaptations by award-winning director, Joe Wright.

### ***To adapt, or not to adapt***

In his critique of novel adaptation, James Schiff writes: “Our desire to retell as well as re-experience the same story over and over, and in a variety of ways, is part of our cultural appetite” (Schiff 166). This is where the impetus for adaptation comes from. When we read a text, especially a classic one that carries the weight of familiar characters and themes, we picture the imagery it depicts in our minds. Depending on how vivid the imagery is, or how wild our imagination, we may even wish to let that image escape our mind through a visual art media. In modern times, this urge commonly manifests itself in the form of a motion picture. While this translation from novel text satisfies the desires of many, some critics believe it simply can’t be done properly. In his analysis of literature and film as media, Seymour Chatman claims:

Unlike painting or sculpture, narrative films do not usually allow us time to dwell on plenteous details. Pressure from the narrative component is too great. Events move too fast. The contemplation of beautiful framing or color or lighting is a pleasure limited to those who can see the film many times or who are fortunate enough to have access to equipment which will allow them to stop the frame (Chatman 126).

Horowitz, another scholar, says, “The real problem with adapting literature to the screen is that there are aspects of it that must remain invisible, things which work precisely because they are not seen. Visualizing those things, as films tend to do, removes this cloak of invisibility and with it something of the original force” (Horowitz 467).

The critical outlook seems to get bleaker when it comes to the adaptation of work from the literary canon. After studying many screen adaptations of Jane Austen’s work, Jocelyn Harris concludes that *Clueless* (1995) – a teen movie loosely based on Austen’s *Emma* – is the most successful adaptation of Austen thus far. Harris claims that because *Clueless* translates to fit modern culture and doesn’t attempt to imitate Austen’s, it can never be deemed a failure of adaptation. Ultimately, Harris declares that if one wishes to experience Jane Austen, one should probably just read her prose, which will always remain intact (Macdonald 49).

But the cultural appetite to adapt that Schiff mentions will never be slaked by Harris’s solution. So, rather than throw in the towel and curl up with a B-movie, so to speak, perhaps we should focus our efforts on ways to improve methods of literature-to-film adaptation. Gard, another scholar studying Austen adaptation, was discouraged with the films he had viewed so far, but he hit on something important here: “[a screen version of Austen] may be dutifully unfolded in basic outline, but the essence of what makes the work worthy is lost, or at least, sadly depleted” (Macdonald 9).

The term “essence” has become very important in my study of film adaptation. It can be defined as “the most important indispensable quality or constituent element of anything” (“Essence”). Certainly, many of these critics are correct in stating that a film cannot possibly directly translate a novel into a new media while still retaining every aspect of the author’s piece

– but might it be possible for a film to get at the novel’s essence? If a film could retain the qualities of a literary piece that are indispensable, would it then be deemed successful?

### *Adapting the Wright way*

From my first exposure to the works of director Joe Wright, I have suspected that capturing the essence is at the core of his directorial vision when adapting a work of literature. My research into his directorial process confirmed my suspicions. In a Q&A conducted for his most recent film, *Anna Karenina* (2013), Wright said, “[I] start with certain ideas, key images and slowly find connections and meanings. It’s a process” (“*Anna Karenina* Q&A”). Wright went on to explain how he spent three days locked in his office painstakingly mapping out these “key images” with designer Sarah Greenwood, determined to understand what the story was really about. The result of this initial process was a screenplay by Tom Stoppard that Producer Paul Webster said “brilliantly [reduced the novel] to the essence of what Tolstoy was really on about – and that is an exploration of different aspects of love” (“Adapting Tolstoy”).

If only some of the aforementioned critics with bleak outlooks on adaptation could see what Wright is up to now, perhaps they would rave along with their colleagues like Schiff, who notes: “Wright was shrewd to give [*Atonement*] the same kind of density that the novel possesses by generating cinematic equivalents of literary intertextuality” (Schiff 171). Wright’s process with Ian McEwan’s novel was similar, as he recalls making a version of it in his head while reading. When the first draft of the screenplay didn’t seem faithful to the essential idea of interwoven perspectives, Wright insisted that they go back to the drawing board (“From Novel to Screen”).

But perhaps those fundamentalist critics would still insist that the idea of essence is too relative, and perhaps they would be right. This idea drove me to dig deeper and uncover just what it is that sets Wright's film adaptations of popular novels apart from others. For me, this is undoubtedly the vivid imagery that Wright employs. Luckily, I found that I was not alone. Webster calls Wright's visual flair "absolutely irresistible," while another producer, Tim Bevan, compares Wright's "forensic attention to detail" to that of a painter ("On Set"). This comparison seemed to tie my theory of Wright's ability to capture essence to what I had learned about ekphrasis – a verbal representation of a visual representation (Webb 7).<sup>i</sup>

### *Adaptation as reverse ekphrasis*

When Wright selects a vivid piece of imagery from a novel to adapt, he is practicing what many scholars call reverse ekphrasis, which can be defined with this inversion of Mitchell's original definition: *visual* representation of *verbal* representation. Within my project, reverse ekphrasis will describe the process by which images depicted verbally in the novels are then depicted visually by Wright onscreen.

The term "image" as I use it here encompasses much more than just a singular snapshot or frame of a film. Rather, it draws from my interpretation of what W.J.T. Mitchell writes here: "The meaning of the picture does not declare itself by a simple and direct reference to the object it depicts. It may depict an idea, a person, a "sound image" (in the case of the rebus), or a thing" (Mitchell 28). Therefore, I justify my use of series of images that make up a scene, which is created through reverse ekphrasis.

In his book *Iconology*, Mitchell produced a diagram that illustrates the process of ekphrasis (*Iconology* 22).<sup>ii</sup> Of course, simply flipping the direction of the arrows in his diagram

would depict reverse ekphrasis, but one would be foolish to use such a diagram to explain film adaptation. Reverse ekphrasis is certainly a tool used by directors like Wright to create adaptation, but were we to represent the process of reverse ekphrasis in film adaptation with a diagram similar to Mitchell's, it would look something like this:

Author's words   □ Adaptor's idea or mental image   □ Adaptor's words in screenplay   □ Director's interpretation of screenplay   □ Actor's interpretation of direction   □ Editor's interpretation of director's vision   □ Completed film

As you can see, there are so many extraneous factors that are often overlooked when studying how an author's text becomes what we eventually see on the silver screen. This is why it is so important for the director to understand the essence of the written work, and fully communicate it to the rest of his or her team. Wright has clearly striven to do just that.

If my theory about capturing the essence of a novel through reverse ekphrasis of key images is true, then we should be able to see the evidence of the method's success in Wright's films. In the following sections, I will illustrate the adaptive journey of a selected key image series/scene from each of Wright's screen adaptations – *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), *Atonement* (2007), and *Anna Karenina* (2013). I have given each of these scenes my own title that attempts to sum up its essence. As a precursor to my own analysis, I will first familiarize my reader with the film in question.

### ***Pride and Prejudice: “A True Likeness?”***

This adaptation of a highly revered Austen classic captured the public’s eye unlike any other. Wright’s very first full-length feature film earned him a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) special honor for “Most Promising Newcomer,” as well as six additional nominations for the film (IMDb). In the United States, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nominated the Wright’s *Pride and Prejudice* for four awards, including Best Achievement in Art Direction (*Ibid*). The cumulative box office results were also impressive – closing in at £14,286,117 and \$38,405,088, respectively (*Ibid*). As for the critics, the less than easily impressed *Film Comment* reviewer, Graham Fuller, called the film “stylish,” (Fuller 71), while the late Roger Ebert gave it a resounding four out of four stars (Ebert).

The public’s positive reception of the film only reflects the hard work in regard to textual research done by its director. Wright points out that, among other things, *Pride and Prejudice* is about “seeing people through the windows of your own understanding” in order to break down the prejudices created by societal class barriers (“Feature Commentary, *Pride and Prejudice*”). Austen illustrates this central message in a variety of ways, but perhaps none so poignant as the scene where Elizabeth Bennett and the Gardiners visit the picture gallery at Pemberley, Mr. Darcy’s estate. Of this scene, critic Roberta Grandi writes: “[Mr. Darcy’s] portrait is not only the metonymy of the man; it is also the embodiment of [Elizabeth’s] opinion and feelings for him” (Grandi 49). Before I discuss how Wright adapts this scene, it is pertinent for the reader to read this portion of Austen’s text, cited below:

“And that,” said Mrs. Reynolds, pointing to another of the miniatures, “is my master—and very like him. It was drawn at the same time as the other—about eight years ago.”



“I have heard much of your master’s fine person,” said Mrs. Gardiner, looking at the picture; “it’s a handsome face. But, Lizzy, you can tell us whether it is like or not.”

Mrs. Reynolds’s respect for Elizabeth seemed to increase on this intimation of her knowing her master.

“Does the young lady know Mr. Darcy?”

Elizabeth coloured, and said—“A little.”

“And do you not find him a very handsome gentleman, Ma’am?”

“Yes, very handsome.”

[...]

In the gallery there were many family portraits, but they could have little to fix the attention of a stranger. Elizabeth walked on in quest of the only face whose features would be known to her. At last it arrested her—and she beheld a striking resemblance of Mr. Darcy, with such a smile over the face, as she remembered to have sometimes seen, when he looked at her. She stood several minutes before the picture in earnest contemplation, and returned to it again before they quitted the gallery. Mrs. Reynolds informed them, that it had been taken in his father’s life time.

There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth’s mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance. The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs. Reynolds was of no trifling nature. What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people’s happiness were in his guardianship!—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!—How much of good or evil must be done by him! Every idea that had been brought forward by the housekeeper was favourable to his character, and as she stood before the canvas, on which he was represented, and fixed his eyes upon herself, she thought of his regard with a deeper

sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression” (Austen 159-162).

This passage marks a major turning point in Austen’s novel, as Elizabeth begins to see Mr. Darcy in a new light. She is no longer blinded by the prejudices of their difference in social standing, but finally sees the human being represented in the portrait for the kind-hearted soul he will ultimately prove himself to be.

When Austen’s text made its journey into Deborah Moggach’s adapted screenplay, its text was cut down considerably, as we see here:

**90 INT. PEMBERLY - DAY. 90**

Elizabeth and the Gardiners are being taken on the tour by the housekeeper, Mrs Reynolds, who witters on in the background with descriptions of each room. Elizabeth is apart and we witness the exquisite house from her point of view. A book lies open, on a reading desk, Elizabeth turns it over to read the title.

**MRS GARDINER**

**(TO ELIZABETH)**

Keep up.

They walk through room after amazing room: a breathtaking library, an unbelievable staircase.

**91 INT. PICTURE GALLERY - PEMBERLY -- DAY. 91**

The huge picture gallery. Elizabeth is apart from the rest looking at the pictures she stops by a painting of Darcy. She looks at it thoughtfully but is interrupted by Mrs Reynolds and the Gardiners who are following her.

**MRS REYNOLDS**

This is my master - Mr Darcy.

**MRS GARDINER**

A handsome face. Lizzie, is it a true likeness of him?

**MRS REYNOLDS**

Does this young lady know Mr Darcy?

**ELIZABETH**

Only a little.

**MRS REYNOLDS**

And do you not think him a handsome man,  
Miss?

**ELIZABETH**

**(THOUGHTFULLY)**

Yes, yes I suppose he is.  
Mrs Reynolds moves the Gardiners on to another painting,  
but Elizabeth stays, staring at Darcy's image.

**MRS REYNOLDS**

And this is his sister, Miss Georgians.  
She plays and sings all day long.  
We realize that in the distance we have heard music.  
Elizabeth is still gazing at the portrait of Darcy, then  
suddenly snaps out of her reverie, as she processes Mrs

**REYNOLDS SPEECH:**

**ELIZABETH**

Are they are at home?<sup>iii</sup>

Moggach's script retains the central action of Austen's scene, but we lose nearly all of Elizabeth's internal discovery. This would seem to give credence to the claims of the skeptical critics I cite, like Gard, who asserts, "The possible advantages of a camera-enforced objectivity are duly paid for by the difficulties of establishing a particular point of view. The camera has no narrative voice... Pictures can only show us the surface of things" (Macdonald 10-11). When measured against many adaptations, these deductions might be accurate. But it's Wright's directorial process that makes all the difference. Please, take a moment to view a clip of the scene [here](#),<sup>iv</sup> and see below *Figs. 1-4*<sup>v</sup>, which will guide you through my analysis.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

The only fundamental difference between Wright’s scene and Austen’s is a slight change in artistic media. In the film’s Feature Commentary, the director explains: “In the novel, Elizabeth studies a painting of Darcy in a picture gallery. But when we saw the sculpture gallery on location, we decided that a sculpture would be much more interesting” (“Feature Commentary,” *Pride and Prejudice*). The sculptures of Chatsworth House in Derbyshire stand in for Darcy’s portrait gallery, but this does not deviate at all from the scene’s essence. In fact, I would argue that sculpture adds a more human element to the art that allows Elizabeth to make her connection to Darcy more easily. Aside from this change, we’re left with a scene brilliantly crafted by Wright and his actors to capture the essence of Austen’s text.

When Elizabeth first enters the gallery at Pemberley, she is distracted by the paintings on the ceiling – undoubtedly a reference back to the original artistic media chosen by the author. The chronology of the film’s scene is changed to be more linear, in that Elizabeth makes one singular journey through the gallery, stopping finally at the bust of Mr. Darcy (**Fig. 4**). This is where the majority of the scene’s text is delivered, and where we see written clearly on Elizabeth’s face how Darcy’s likeness “arrest[s]” her (Austen 162).

The manner in which she examines the first sculpture of the veiled woman (*Fig. 1*) is how Wright first taps into the essence – he is allowing Elizabeth to see firsthand the veil of her prejudice (Grandi 50). Though she may not be consciously aware of this in the moment, it will be revealed to her as she makes her journey through the gallery. Both hers and the camera's rapt attention to the nude sculptures (*Fig. 2*) seem to suggest rising erotic feelings for their owner, which also seem to be awakened in the novel when Elizabeth recalls with fondness how Darcy smiles at her. Finally, the camera scrolls over the bust of Darcy as Elizabeth approaches it. Though its eyes are empty and its whole being is clearly made of marble, the enchantment of Elizabeth's gaze reveals it to be a "true likeness" as Mrs. Gardiner queries in the film. So much so that Elizabeth never looks back to directly address anyone – she stands transfixed with Darcy.

Though Wright never addresses this directly, I can only assume the direction he gave Keira Knightley, the actress playing Elizabeth, was to never take her eyes off of the sculpture of Darcy until she had arrived at a new understanding of the man, which made her actually desire his presence for the first time – thus the "Is she at home?" line, referring to Gerogiana, whose presence at Pemberley would surely confirm Mr. Darcy's. Elizabeth never looks away until Mrs. Reynolds and the Gardiners are long gone off-camera, and we can watch her "arrested" face – the strongest pieces of reverse ekphrasis – as she contemplates all that Austen writes in the final lines of the above citation.

But it's the brilliant desperation in Knightley's voice and the brimming tears in her eyes that sells the whole scene, thus showing the power of reverse ekphrasis of even just a single word. As Grandi concludes, "the final reaction shot on Elizabeth clearly communicates the inner journey described in the novel" (Grandi 49-50). In a single scene created through reverse ekphrasis, Wright has shown us the essence of Austen's novel. Elizabeth finally arrives at seeing

Darcy through the window of her own understanding, and her pride and prejudices will soon come crashing down and change her world forever.

***Atonement: “Two figures by a fountain”***

Just two years later, Wright was at it again. His audience was clearly hooked, especially in the U.S., where he earned over \$20,000,000 more at the box office with his adaptation of Ian McEwan’s bestseller, *Atonement* (IMDb). This time, he was raking in the awards – BAFTAs for Best Film and Best Production Design out of 14 nominations; an Academy Award for Best Music out of seven nominations, including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay; and two Golden Globe awards for Best Motion Picture Drama and Best Original Score, also out of seven nominations. *Film Comment*’s Fuller called this one a “putative mainstream classic” with many “pictorial glories” (Fuller 71), which earned yet another set of four stars from Mr. Ebert (Ebert).

On the surface, a more recent novel might have seemed less intimidating, but the style of McEwan’s tale made Austen’s prose seem straightforward. Yet, even McEwan himself admits that *Atonement* is his “Jane Austen novel” (*Conversations* 86), “haunted” (Groes 70) by, or rather loosely based on, the works of Austen and other classic authors – particularly *Northanger Abbey*. McEwan’s novel seems to deal with the narrow line between reality and non-reality, truth, and untruth, which can be problematic, as its author points out:

This novel I think creates particular problems for the screenwriter. It’s very interior – inside of the consciousness in several of the characters. In a movie, you only have what people say and do. So the screenwriter has to find a way of getting that interior feeling across (“From Novel to Screen”).

And yet, scholars like Groes and Hayes praise McEwan's work for "the readiness with which [it] has been adapted for the screen," and go on to describe his "formal and stylistic attention to detail, visual perspective and point of view" (Groes 27). They present the example of *Atonement's* scene by the fountain, which I will examine in the coming pages, saying it "suggests an imagination schooled in the demands and conventions of visual media" (Groes 27).

Rather than skim over the idea of multiple perspectives that is heavily present in the novel, Wright attacks it head on. I have selected the scene by the fountain because it is a multiple-perspective scene. McEwan presents it first in what appears to be real time, so to speak, as the characters Cecelia and Robbie experience it. Later, he presents it as Briony Tallis, Cecelia's younger sister, witnesses it from her bedroom window. Again, I will direct the reader's attention to McEwan's real-time scene, cited below:

Her idea was to lean over the parapet and hold the flowers in the vase while she lowered it on its side into the water, but it was at this point that Robbie, wanting to make amends, tried to be helpful.

"Let me take that," he said, stretching out a hand. "I'll fill it for you, and you take the flowers."

"I can manage, thanks." She was already holding the vase over the basin.

But he said, "Look, I've got it." And he had, tightly between forefinger and thumb. "Your cigarette will get wet. Take the flowers."

This was a command on which he tried to confer urgent masculine authority. The effect on Cecilia was to cause her to tighten her grip. She had no time, and certainly no inclination, to explain that plunging vase and flowers into the water would help with the natural look she wanted in the arrangement. She tightened her hold and twisted her body away from him. He was not so easily shaken off. With a sound like a dry twig snapping, a section of the lip of the vase came



away in his hand, and split into two triangular pieces which dropped into the water and tumbled to the bottom in a synchronous, seesawing motion, and lay there, several inches apart, writhing in the broken light.

Cecilia and Robbie froze in the attitude of their struggle. Their eyes met, and what she saw in the bilious mélange of green and orange was not shock, or guilt, but a form of challenge, or even triumph. She had the presence of mind to set the ruined vase back down on the step before letting herself confront the significance of the accident. It was irresistible, she knew, even delicious, for the graver it was, the worse it would be for Robbie. Her dead uncle, her father's dear brother, the wasteful war, the treacherous crossing of the river, the preciousness beyond money, the heroism and goodness, all the years backed up behind the history of the vase reaching back to the genius of Höroldt, and beyond him to the mastery of the arcanists who had reinvented porcelain.

"You idiot! Look what you've done."

He looked into the water, then he looked at back at her, and simply shook his head as he raised a hand to cover his mouth. By this gesture he assumed full responsibility, but at that moment, she hated him for the inadequacy of the response. He glanced toward the basin and sighed. For a moment he thought she was about to step backward onto the vase, and he raised his hand and pointed, though he said nothing. Instead he began to unbutton his shirt. Immediately she knew what he was about. Intolerable. He had come to the house and removed his shoes and socks—well, she would show him then. She kicked off her sandals, unbuttoned her blouse and removed it, unfastened her skirt and stepped out of it and went to the basin wall. He stood with hands on his hips and stared as she climbed into the water in her underwear. Denying his help, any possibility of making amends, was his punishment. The unexpectedly freezing water that caused her to gasp was his punishment. She held her breath, and sank, leaving her hair fanned out across the surface. Drowning herself would be his punishment.

When she emerged a few seconds later with a piece of pottery in each hand, he knew better than to offer to help her out of the water. The frail white nymph, from whom water cascaded far more successfully than it did from the beefy Triton, carefully placed the pieces by the vase. She dressed quickly, turning her wet arms with difficulty through her silk sleeves, and tucking the unfastened blouse into the skirt. She picked up her sandals and thrust them under her arm, put the fragments in the pocket of her skirt and took up the vase. Her movements were savage, and she would not meet his eye. He did not exist, he was banished, and this was also the punishment. He stood there dumbly as she walked away from him, barefoot across the lawn, and he watched her darkened hair swing heavily across her shoulders, drenching her blouse. Then he turned and looked into the water in case there was a piece she had missed. It was difficult to see because the roiling surface had yet to recover its tranquillity, and the turbulence was driven by the lingering spirit of her fury. He put his hand flat upon the surface, as though to quell it. She, meanwhile, had disappeared into the house (27-29).

What strikes me initially about the scene is not only the clever and sensual narrative, but how McEwan's series of ekphrases literally seem to leap off the page. This is exactly the readiness for screen that Groes and Hayes refer to. The depictions are so methodical in all of the right moments – my favorites being Cecelia directly after she emerges from the water, and Robbie's hand above the surface of the water.

Now it's very easy to see how Wright could picture his film as he was reading McEwan's novel, and I would argue that he could have directed straight from McEwan's pages, but in the film industry, there simply must be a screenplay. So, Screenwriter Christopher Hampton produced the following piece:

There's an edge of real hostility in her voice. She puts her cigarette between her lips and bends to pick up the vase, preparing to dunk it in the fountain, having first taken out the flowers and laid them on the step.

ROBBIE  
Let me do that.

CECILIA  
I'm all right, thanks.

But ROBBIE persists, reaching for the vase.

ROBBIE  
You take the flowers.

CECILIA  
I'm all right!

He gets hold of the vase, just as CECILIA turns away; and with the crisp sound of a dry twig snapping, two triangular sections of the rim of the vase detach themselves in his hands. In his

shock, he lets them go; and they drop into the fountain and sink slowly, spiralling to the bottom, almost three feet down. CECILIA looks at him, horrified.

CECILIA  
You idiot! You realise this is probably the most valuable thing we own.

ROBBIE  
Not any more, it isn't.

The hint of truculence in his voice serves to agitate CECILIA even more. She sets the vase down. Then straightens up, aware that ROBBIE has begun to unbutton his shirt. She takes a step towards him, then, confusedly, a step back. ROBBIE, afraid she's going to step on the vase, throws out a restraining hand, a gesture so abrupt as to seem peremptory.

ROBBIE  
Careful!

CECILIA's response is to kick off her shoes and, in front of ROBBIE's transfixed gaze, to strip down to her underwear. Then she steps over the lip of the fountain and lowers herself into it.

She gasps at the unexpectedly cold water, but doesn't hesitate to plunge her face beneath the surface.

ROBBIE, watches, unable to look away, his expression a queasy mixture of fear and longing. CECILIA'S hair fantails out across the surface of the water.

Not bad, as far as screenplays go. This time, not only do we retain the central action, but we get a hint of that eroticism and pent-up feelings between young lovers that is so prevalent in McEwan's text. Yet, perhaps we lose sight of how this particular scene moves as a part of the film as a whole.

Moving back to the novel's essence of reality and non-reality, truth and untruth, Wright will place the viewer directly in the middle of the scene, making us feel as though we were experiencing it – perhaps the most effective way of making the unreal seem real. Just as Briony insists later in the film that she saw something she really didn't see, viewers may very well leave insisting that they were there watching and experiencing this scene between Cecelia and Robbie. As you take a moment to view the [clip](#),<sup>vi</sup> pay close attention to the shots portrayed below in ***Figs. 5-8:***

**Figure 5**

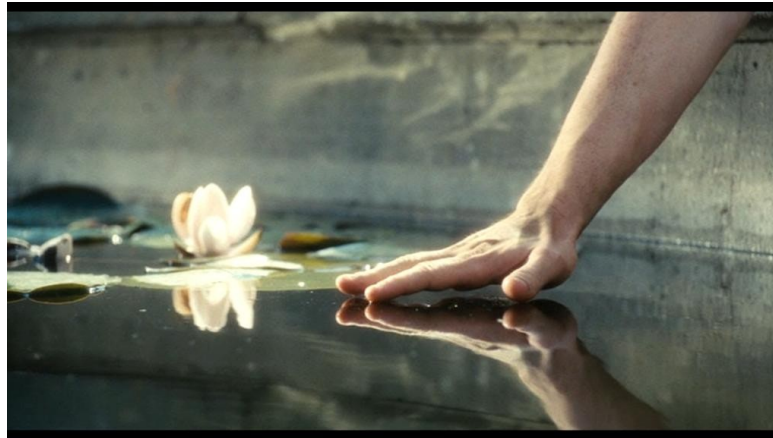


**Figure 6**



**Figure 7**



**Figure 8**

As you can see from the screen shots above, Wright uses some very close perspective shots in order to play with not only the idea of living in the scene, but also the subtle and subconscious idea of voyeurism ever-present in McEwan's novel. Wright fully reveals this to us immediately after the scene transition, as he cuts to a shot of Briony, who has obviously been watching the scene play out from her window.

Logistically, Wright maintains the fast pace of the back-and-forth in Cecelia and Robbie's initial argument about the vase, which is a reverse ekphrastic moment in itself. The already present tension keeps building until the point when the piece of the vase snaps off "with a sound like a dry twig snapping" (McEwan 27) and plunks into the fountain's water. Wright's actors freeze "in the attitude of their struggle" – as McEwan terms it – looking into each other's eyes. Wright sees this as "the moment where they really acknowledge to themselves their sexual attraction to one another" (Feature Commentary, *Atonement*). Robbie finds humor in the challenge he has presented the woman he loves, and in Wright's version, Cecelia literally rises to meet it, clearly about to advance on Robbie. The fundamental difference between Wright and McEwan's scene comes at this very moment – Robbie calls out "Careful!" as Cecelia almost

steps on additional pieces of the vase, where in the novel, he holds up a hand to stay her, but notably doesn't speak.

I attribute this difference to Wright's attempt to point back to the idea of multiple perspectives. When Robbie shouts and raises a hand toward Cecelia, we're reminded that, to an onlooker (like Briony), who doesn't understand the scene, his command might look threatening – insisting that Cecelia jump into the fountain for his pleasure, rather than ensuring she doesn't step on the sharp pieces. And indeed, we discover later that this is exactly how Briony perceives the scene. Since we don't really get much of her inner monologue as we do in the novel, we need to see this stark contrast between the real version of the scene and Briony's version of the scene.

With a slight deviation from the novel's text, Wright creates this contrast for us, all while maintaining important ekphrastic moments that capture the essence of the scene. How better could one describe Keira Knightley as Cecelia in **Fig. 7** than with McEwan's original text, "the frail white nymph, from whom water cascaded far more successfully than it did from the beefy Triton" (McEwan 29)? Or how could Wright have better represented the action of the shot in **Fig. 8**: "He put his hand flat upon the surface, as though to quell it" (McEwan 29)? Again, the pictorial glories Fuller mentions represent the novel's text through reverse ekphrasis, and through it, maintain the novel's essence of reality and unreality, truth and untruth.

### ***Anna Karenina: "Alone in a crowded ball-room"***

Wright waited six more years before tackling yet another classic work of literature. This time, it was Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* – an over 700-page novel that filmmakers have attempted to adapt countless times in the past century. Wright said that every time he would visit another possible filming location, the site's curator would tell him about all of the past versions of *Anna Karenina* that had been shot there ("Adapting Tolstoy"). Not wanting to be just another in the



line-up, Wright decided to go another direction entirely. He convinced his designer to help him set the film largely in an old theatre, which would stand for the great performances of social propriety put on by the Russian aristocracy. This stylistic choice turned the film into what Wright calls “a bit of a ballet with words” (Feature Commentary, *Anna Karenina*) which many critics did not take kindly to.

Wright’s *Anna Karenina* won only two major awards total for Jaqueline Durran’s costume design – one Academy Award out of four total nominations, and one BAFTA out of six total nominations (IMDb). The film’s total box office earnings for the U.S. and the U.K. combined – approximately \$21,549,617 – didn’t even come close to the precedent set by its predecessors *Pride and Prejudice* and *Atonement*. Fuller blamed Wright’s choice of setting, as well as the portrayal of Anna as a “raging sexual narcissist” (Fuller 72). He goes on to say, “the look is gorgeous, of course, but seldom has so much aestheticization served so much heartlessness,” and for similar reasons, Ebert brought this film’s rating down to a less than notable two and half stars (Ebert).

Apparently, it had been quite some time since these folks had actually read Tolstoy’s novel, if they even read it at all. His narrative is important, to be sure, but the amount of time the author devotes to little stylistic details like the sash on Kitty’s dress or the manner in which Anna makes the leap to her death are all clearly essential to him. In fact, as Wright points out, Anna’s final journey down the train tracks pre-suicide is one of the first stream of consciousness scenes in literature. Wright said, “I really tried to stay faithful to [Tolstoy’s] interpretation” (Feature Commentary, *Anna Karenina*).

When it comes to this film, I fall more into the awestruck category with Pete Hammond, who said, “This is one of the most stunning films I have seen in a long time” (“*Anna Karenina*



Q&A”). Not only was Wright’s choice of setting daring, it helped to yet again achieve the essence of the novel. Producer Paul Webster and I agree – Tolstoy’s novel is “an exploration of different aspects of love” (“Adapting Tolstoy”). The ballroom scene cited below contains the inciting incident of the novel’s central tragic love story:

Kitty danced in the first pair, and luckily for her she was not obliged to talk, because Korsunsky ran about all the time giving orders in his domain. Vronsky and Anna sat almost opposite to her. And she saw them with her far-sighted eyes, she saw them close by, too, when they met in the dance, and the more she saw of them, the surer she was that the blow had fallen. She saw that they felt as if they were alone in that crowded ball-room. On Vronsky’s face, usually so firm and self-possessed, she noticed the expression of bewilderment and submission which had so surprised her—an expression like that of an intelligent dog when it feels guilty.

Anna smiled—and the smile passed on to him; she became thoughtful—and he became serious. Some supernatural power attracted Kitty’s eyes to Anna’s face. She looked charming in her simple black dress; her full arms with the bracelets, her firm neck with the string of pearls round it, her curly hair now disarranged, every graceful movement of her small feet and hands, her handsome animated face,—everything about her was enchanting, but there was something terrible and cruel in her charm.

Kitty admired her even more than before, and suffered more and more. She felt herself crushed and her face expressed it. When Vronsky happened to knock against her as they danced, he did not at once recognize her, so changed was she.

‘A delightful ball,’ he remarked, in order to say something.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

In the middle of the mazurka, performing a complicated figure newly-invented by Korsunsky, Anna stepped into the middle of the room and chose two men and two ladies, one of

whom was Kitty, to join her. Kitty, as she moved toward Anna, gazed at her with fear. Anna half-closed her eyes to look at Kitty, smiled and pressed her hand, but noticing that Kitty only responded to her smile by a look of surprise and despair, she turned away from her and talked cheerfully with the other lady.

‘Yes, there is something strange, satanic, and enchanting about her,’ thought Kitty.

Anna did not wish to stay to supper, but the master of the house tried to persuade her to do so...Anna did not stay for supper, but went away” (75-76).

It’s Kitty’s depiction of Anna here as both satanic and enchanting that has left me wondering if the film critics really read the novel. Clearly Wright did read it several times, and if his portrayal of Anna came off as harshly as the critics describe, perhaps they should remember that Tolstoy’s Anna is often shown through the eyes of Kitty, who becomes wildly jealous of her for capturing Vronsky’s attention. After all, what sort of love story would it be without a little jealousy, but I digress.

This time, Tom Stoppard’s screenplay adds dialogue to set the scene, where in the novel there was virtually none at all – it is simply implied that at some point, Vronsky has asked Anna to dance the mazurka instead of Kitty. The adapted scene he creates is as follows:

*Anna steals a sidelong glance towards Vronsky but he is no longer there. She looks for him among the dancers, smiles at Kitty going by with the enthusiastic, inexperienced Boris.*

*Suddenly, Vronsky is at Anna's side.*

VRONSKY

Dance with me.

ANNA

*(calmly)*

I am not used to being spoken to like that by a man I met once at a railway station.

VRONSKY

I dare say, but if I'm not to dance with you, I'm getting out of this operetta and going home.

ANNA

Then, for Kitty's sake.

*She gives him her hand.*

*Kitty looks for Vronsky, can't see him, then is taken aback to see him with Anna. Kitty watches Anna dancing. Anna says something which makes Vronsky laugh. Anna laughs. Anna blossoms in front of Kitty's eyes. Vronsky twirls Anna around and she comes smiling into his arms.*

*It goes on like that. Kitty watches them from within the arms of young men, old men, from the wall. Anna and Vronsky dance slow, they dance fast, gaily, solemnly, gazes locked.*

*Others are noticing too: Countess Nordston, Princess Shcherbatsky, and eagle-eyed matrons. Anna, oblivious, has found a release in herself.*

*Anna looks smilingly around the dancing circle and sees Kitty staring at her. Anna "wakes up." Everything which made her drunk makes her sober in the instant. She waits until the change of partners brings Kitty and Vronsky together. She beckons them into the middle. Her own partner expects to re-join the circumference with Anna, but she makes an apology and escapes through the circle, running towards the door.*

*With a howl and clatter, the St. Petersburg express seems to crash through the ballroom.*

Even from just one reading of this scene, one begins to picture the stylistic possibilities that Stoppard manages to make somehow more exciting than the work of the other two screenwriters I have cited. But again, the screenplay lacks some of Tolstoy's attention to detail – how Kitty notices every nuance of Anna's appearance, and one very special sentence that is easily missed by some. Wright expertly turns one sentence of Tolstoy into the magic that brings an entire scene to life. The film's Anna and Vronsky are, as Kitty suspects in the novel, under the impression that they're "alone in a crowded ball-room" (Tolstoy 75). Once again, please view the [clip](#)<sup>vii</sup> along with *Figs. 9-12*.

Figure 9



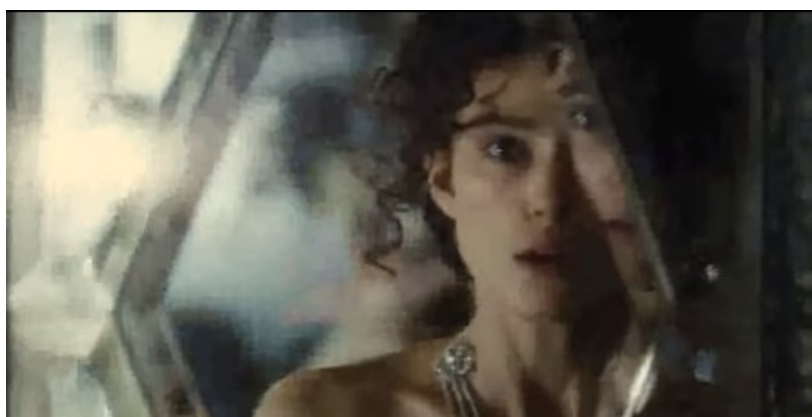
**Figure 10**



**Figure 11**



**Figure 12**



The scene in the film begins as Vronsky comes up behind Anna, who watches the ball happening around her (**Fig. 9**). Rather than have the whole scene play out from Kitty's perspective, Wright has the inciting incident of Anna spontaneously accepting Vronsky's offer to dance happen in a secluded corner – as many affairs often begin. This only heightens Kitty's jealousy when she finally notices them dancing, since she hasn't been turned down, so much as forgotten by her suitor. Like in the novel, she notices every change in the new couple's expressions, as it becomes clear to her that “the blow ha[s] fallen” (Tolstoy 75), and that the two would soon become lovers. This is made clear by the long shot of Kitty represented in **Fig 11** – a direct reverse ekphrasis of “she felt herself crushed and her face expressed it” (Tolstoy 76).

Tolstoy's “alone in a crowded ball-room” moment comes in the middle of the dance, right after Vronsky has lifted Anna into the air and let her back down to the floor, their faces nearly touching. This is when things start really heating up, as the room has gone dark, and the other dancers who were clearly there before the lift have now disappeared. Anna and Vronsky dance alone, transfixed by their own lust (**Fig. 10**). Wright adds in breathy, sex-like sounds amidst the orchestra's strains to foreshadow the inevitable deed that will be done in later scenes.

Other than the added dialogue from the implied scene I mentioned, the only major difference from the novel is that Anna wears diamonds around her neck instead of pearls and has no bracelets to speak of. Her black dress, however, is certainly what Tolstoy calls simple for the time period. After omitting Tolstoy's superfluous introduction between Kitty and Vronsky, Wright remains faithful to the end of the scene. When Anna gives up Vronsky to his old partner, Kitty looks at her “with fear” (Tolstoy 76). As she eventually does in the novel, Anna turns to leave, but first sees herself in the mirror as Kitty sees her – “strange, satanic, and enchanting”

(Tolstoy 76). So, again, if Anna sometimes appears to be portrayed in a negative light, that may be because in some moments, Tolstoy shows us his title character through the eyes of a young girl who views Anna as somehow satanic. Anna's guilt is represented via the scene's second surrealist moment (**Fig. 12**) – a train nearly comes crashing through the mirror, foreshadowing Anna's death.

The essence of one very long story plays out in this scene, which Wright so brilliantly captured. By taking very subtle details Tolstoy gives us and using reverse ekphrasis to transform them into wildly stylistic sequences, he showed both the wonderful and terrible paths that love can take, and how it can lead to pleasure, pain, jealousy and guilt all at once. One must understand this before one can grasp the true happiness that the character Levin eventually experiences with Kitty.

### ***Drawing Conclusions***

Harris, one of the critics of Austen adaptations, said, "On many occasions, visual sign systems successfully supplant verbal ones, and cinematic techniques quickly convey complex information" (Macdonald 49). We can clearly see integrity in her point and mine as we watch Wright represent a novel's essence through reverse ekphrasis. This would seem to suggest that there is hope for adapting classic works of literature, provided heavy textual research is employed – by *all* members of a film's production team.

At least in the case of Wright's adaptations, there appears to be very few disconnects between the author's text as the finished film – the two opposing ends of my Mitchell-esque diagram on page six. However, for all three of the works we looked at, it seemed that the screenwriters were almost trying too hard to adapt. They left out many essential details (i.e.

*Atonement*'s multiple perspectives or *Anna Karenina*'s "alone in a crowded ball-room moment") that Wright then re-inserted into the final products. This could possibly be remedied with closer collaboration between screenwriters, authors, and directors. Perhaps this would also help keep individual egos in check. Ultimately, it appears that when creating an adaptation, it can never hurt to return to the text and move through it with a fine-tooth comb, as we have done here.

Before I tie this up in a neat little bow, so to speak, I should make a few concessions. Of course, we have not examined the big picture of each film – only specific scenes that Wright, several critics, and myself have deemed important. They obviously contain moments where the power of reverse ekphrasis is very strong, whereas in other moments, perhaps it wasn't. Also, we should remember that these screenwriters have a very difficult job to do, and they have done it considerably well in comparison to many others. Their multiple awards and nominations speak for themselves, but that doesn't mean they can't stand to improve upon their craft.

It is also important to note that even though I think Stoppard and Wright did a splendid job adapting *Anna Karenina*, and even though my findings prove that reverse ekphrasis was certainly part of the process, the public did not receive the film as well as I did. This could also be explained in many different ways – up to and including that Tolstoy's novel is perhaps not as appealing to modern audiences as the other two. Or, perhaps the critics didn't grasp the allegory. Anna certainly isn't satanic or "a raging sexual narcissist" – but people misunderstood her. Such is also the life of many film directors. Sometimes the public understands your work, and other times they don't. I'm simply grateful that directors like Wright do continue to adapt classic literature, despite the nay-sayers.

No one adaptation will ever achieve perfection, but they certainly can be brilliant failures. As Schiff suggests, they can "[take] us deeper inside the source text, revealing aspects that can



easily escape notice, even on multiple readings” (Schiff 172). They can also “[enter] into a conversation with the original that animates the viewers’ pleasure in both works” (Macdonald 195). In order for us to continue reading intelligently, as Chatman suggests, we must continue to demand adaptations that come in a variety of media forms (Chatman 140). If film adaptations of literature will continue to be made – and the aforementioned cultural appetite suggests that they will – we can see here that reverse ekphrasis should be a key tool for directors and screenwriters to use. Ultimately, this will help us, the audience, better understand what we can learn from the essence of brilliant works of literature.

### Endnotes

i Here, Webb is citing W. J. T. Mitchell – the foremost scholar of visual studies. However, since Mitchell’s writing can be dense, I have gleaned more understanding from Webb’s article, “Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre.”

ii

iii The derivative of the Moggach’s line “Is she at home?” also comes from Austen’s text (159-160) when Elizabeth notes that she wishes to ask Mrs. Reynolds whether or not Darcy is home, but “had not the courage for it” — perhaps explaining Wright’s choice to have her deliver the line to thin air.

iv I have included selected stills from the scene in question, but one can view the clip via this YouTube link, which is also hyperlinked in-text: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=497WRsxy3nM>

v All photos in this project were taken as screenshots directly from my copies of each DVD.

vi A clip of “Two figures by a fountain” via YouTube, hyperlinked in-text:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkF3M\\_FE4MM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkF3M_FE4MM)

vii A clip of “Alone in a crowded ball-room” via YouTube, hyperlinked in-

text:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOwsZ6bDqJU>

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